

Jeremiah 36:23

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And it came to pass, that when Jehudi had read three or four leaves, he cut it with the penknife, and cast it into the fire that was on the hearth, until all the roll was consumed in the fire that was on the hearth.

Analysis

Yet Jehoiakim the king of Judah cut it with the penknife, and cast it into the fire that was on the hearth, until all the roll was consumed in the fire that was on the hearth. This verse records one of Scripture's most dramatic acts of defiance against God's word. The Hebrew *ta'ar hasofer* ("penknife" or "scribe's knife") was typically used for sharpening reed pens and cutting scrolls—tools meant for preserving God's word, now weaponized against it. The deliberate, methodical burning—column by column as it was read—reveals calculated contempt, not impulsive anger.

The striking contrast with Josiah's response to discovering Scripture (2 Kings 22:11-13) could not be sharper. Josiah tore his clothes in repentance; Jehoiakim tears the scroll in rebellion. Josiah trembled at God's word; Jehoiakim treats it with disdain. This illustrates Jesus' parable of the sower (Matthew 13:1-23)—the same word produces vastly different responses depending on the heart's condition.

Theologically, this passage teaches:

1. Human opposition cannot nullify God's word—God simply commands it rewritten (verse 28)
2. rejecting God's word brings inevitable judgment (verses 30-31)
3. the heart's disposition toward Scripture reveals one's true spiritual state;

4. God's word outlasts all attempts to destroy it.

Church history repeatedly demonstrates this pattern: from Diocletian's edict burning Bibles (303 CE) to modern persecution, God's word endures while its opponents perish.

Historical Context

Jehoiakim's action occurred in the ninth month (verse 9), corresponding to December—hence the fire on the hearth for warmth. The king sat in his winter house (verse 22), the royal palace's seasonal quarters. The casual, comfortable setting makes the act more chilling—this wasn't mob violence but calculated contempt by Judah's highest authority in his own residence.

Archaeological parallel: The Qumran scrolls discovered at the Dead Sea show how carefully Jewish scribes treated Scripture centuries later, demonstrating the horror Jehoiakim's act would evoke in later Jewish consciousness. His burning of God's word epitomized the covenant apostasy that made exile necessary. Remarkably, the scroll's destruction didn't prevent its preservation—we possess Jeremiah's prophecies today because God commanded their rewriting, with additions (verse 32). God's word proves indestructible.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. In what subtle ways might we 'cut up' Scripture by selectively accepting only comfortable passages while rejecting challenging ones?
2. How does Jehoiakim's and Josiah's contrasting responses to God's word challenge you to examine your own heart's receptivity?
3. What does the indestructibility of God's word despite human opposition teach about engaging in Scripture translation and distribution today?

Additional Cross-References

Proverbs 13:13 (Parallel theme): Whoso despiseth the word shall be destroyed:
but he that feareth the commandment shall be rewarded.

1 Kings 22:27 (Parallel theme): And say, Thus saith the king, Put this fellow in the prison, and feed him with bread of affliction and with water of affliction, until I come in peace.

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